

An investigation into the complexity of organizational problems and consensual deliberation in collaborative planning.

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Abstract

Consensus building and other forms of collaborative planning are increasingly used for identifying, negotiating and resolving social and political fragmentation, shared power and conflicting values. Consensus strives toward cooperation and win-win solutions versus competitive exchange, often seen in litigious models of decision-making where a judgment is made and a win-lose solution is proposed. In this paper, I investigate the complexity of organizational problems in relation to collaborative planning and assess the utility of consensual process through literary reviews. I examine various issues related to collaborative planning and note outcomes that may effect collaborative efforts. While exploring problems related to cultural organizations, Kelly Barsdate (2001) found, "Immediate hurdles to be overcome include the need for increased communication among the managers of the respective cultural agencies and the need for increased organizational capacity statewide" (p. 4). With this in mind, I pay special attention to innovations that may lead to increased communication among managers of respective cultural/environmental agencies and the processes of consensus in diverse groups. Issues in relation to diverse stakeholders and public participation, minority views, conflict resolution and third party facilitation will be noted. Finally, I offer suggestions for further research as related to collaborative planning and decision-making.

Introduction

Why collaboration and collaborative planning? Collaboration is a term that is frequently used, however the processes and best practices used to implement and

sustain a healthy collaborative effort are yet to be determined. Collaborative planning is directed toward an objective. Although that objective may not be reached, it provides an opportunity for all people affected by the decision to be at the table. When organizations/individuals come together to make decisions in relation to a common goal, communication often becomes difficult as conflicting values and processes for achieving goals (now complicated by globalization), arise between diverse stakeholders. This paper seeks to understand current issues organizations are facing in the collaborative process and best practices leading to sustainable effective decision-making and implementation. Issues and practices in relation to diverse stakeholders and public participation, minority views, conflict resolution and third party facilitation will be noted. Finally, I offer suggestions for further research related to collaborative planning and decision-making based on the information gathered from literature reviews derived from various journals and books. Based on limited research, a deeper (versus broader) investigation into each of the above mentioned issues and processes related to collaborative planning/ consensus building in the environmental and cultural arenas is necessary to truly understand the best practices of decision-making in these fields.

Collaboration Defined

In order to understand collaborative planning (sometimes referred to as consensus building), it is important to define and theorize collaboration. I discovered not one

commonly accepted definition but several with something to offer. There are various articles in which special issues of collaboration appear and at least seven definitions.

Wood (1991, p. 143-144) summarizes them as follows:

- A process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible (Westley and Vredenburg).
- A constructive management of differences (Pasquero).
- A process of joint decision making among key stakeholders of a problem domain about the future of that domain (Logsdon, Sharfman, Gray and Yan).
- An interactive process having a shared trans-mutational purpose and characterized by explicit voluntary membership, joint decision-making, agreed-upon rules, and temporary structure (Roberts & Bradley).
- The formal or informal institutions, rules, and decision-making procedures shaped by prevailing principles and norms held by relevant actors about acceptable behavior in a given issue area (Golich).
- The “development” of a collaborative venture is “ a medium-to long-term systemic capacity for addressing shared problems or for achieving shared goals at the interorganizational and community levels (Selsky).
- A form of interorganizational relationships with a unique administrative body or coordinating agency called a federation management organization (Fleisher).

For the purposes of this research, I will use Wood’s (1991) revised definition of collaboration that uses one element (shared institutions/rules/norms) which is applied across these definitions and broadens them to state that collaboration “occurs when a

group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain” (p.146). Wood defends certain elements of his definition and states, “stakeholders” refers to “groups or organizations with an interest in the problem domain and raises the empirical question of whether they have common or different interests” (p. 146). Autonomous is crucial to understanding collaboration for “stakeholders retain their independent decision-making powers even when they agree to abide by shared rules within the collaborative process” (p. 146). Shared rules, norms, and structures may exist when “participants already share a negotiated order” (p. 148). Generally collaborations are “perceived as temporary and evolving structures,” however there are more “permanent forms of collaboration such as joint ventures, federations, and international associations” (p. 148). Collaborations are directed toward an objective, so participants “act or decide.” Therefore, collaborations “exist merely if/as long as the stakeholders engage in a process intended to result in action or decision” (p.148). Regarding outcomes, some authors believe success “involves achieving the intended objective” (p. 148). Finally, collaboration “requires that the participants orient their processes, decisions, and actions toward issues related to the problem domain that brought them together. This domain may be as narrow and specific as a local rush-hour traffic snarl, or as broad and unwieldy as balancing economic and ecological interests in national public policy” (p.148).

Processes of Collaborative Planning/Consensus Building in Diverse Groups

Straus (1999), believes there are four major phases to consensus building and collaborative planning processes:

1. The start up phase: begins when one or more leaders within a community or organization 1) acknowledges that a problem exists beyond the power of a single individual to solve and 2) decides to explore the possibility of bringing together people with diverging views of a problem to try to solve it. The decision is often to hire a consultant to assist with the next phase.
2. The process design phase: involves determining whether or not a consensus-based process will succeed, who should be involved, and how to proceed. These tasks may be taken up by a consultant, who conducts a conflict assessment and brings recommendations for a proposed process design back to the larger group of stakeholders.
3. Consensus building phase: stakeholders convene in a series of meetings to build consensus step by step, from creating a common understanding of a problem to coming to agreement on solution.
4. Implementation phase: agreements reached in the consensus-building phase are put into action. A representative group of stakeholders may need to monitor implementation to ensure that an agreement is faithfully and effectively carried out (p.138-39).

Collaborative planning requires a time commitment to the process. If more time is spent at the beginning of a planning process creating clear guidelines and roles, then less reactionary time will be spent in the end.

De Dreu (2003), noted:

Successful negotiation increases organizational effectiveness, and contributes to the stability of international relations. Negotiation is, however difficult and

individuals frequently reach outcomes that are suboptimal by normative standards. As a major underlying cause, researchers have pointed out that individuals are imperfect decision makers and often rely on cognitive heuristics that help them make quick and efficient judgments and decisions that, potentially, sacrifice accuracy and quality. An important reason for reliance on cognitive heuristics and erroneous reasoning in negotiation may be the limited time individuals have to negotiate a mutually beneficial, integrative agreement. When there are few time constraints individuals could elaborate upon the issues in the negotiation, pursue new alternatives extensively, screen possibilities for agreement systematically, verify their judgments before acting upon them, and seek advice and support when their cognitive capacities appear too limited to deal with the complexities of the situation...Likewise, individuals are advised to ask for a "time-out " when they feel a need to consider issues and possibilities in silence..."buying time" is a negotiation tactic usually seen as a way to strengthen one's position and to be better able to do well personally (p. 280-281).

DeDreu noted evidence from Kruglanski and Freund (1983) that suggests that time pressure induces, "closing of the mind: people seek cognitive closure, stop considering multiple alternatives, engage in shallow rather than thorough and systematic processing of information, and refrain from critical probing of a given seemingly adequate solution or judgment." In three experiments, they discovered that, "individuals were more likely to fall prey to primacy effects, ethnic stereotyping, and numerical anchoring when time pressure was high rather than low"(p. 281).

Stakeholders

Margerum's (2002) case studies regarding building consensus and models for practice, "revealed the importance of the stakeholder selection process and composition, which confirmed well-established principles in the literature on clear process, inclusion, and flexibility" (p. 242). Margerum noted that without a clear description of what the decision-making process looks like, including the choice of stakeholders for a group, consensus building was difficult. In regards to cultural policy, the stakeholders should be representative of everyone the policies affect. In the article, *Stakeholders in Cultural Policy-Making*, Yudice (Forthcoming) states:

Actors look something like: officials of: National, local and supranational ministries/secretariats of culture and/or communications and information departments; professional practitioners: directors and managers of museums and cultural teletechnological workers, officials in charge of relations with publics, conservators; community groups; heritage institutions; private philanthropic funders; corporate funders; foundations and nongovernmental organizations; educators in arts and cultural administration training programs; cultural journalists; cultural attaches; copyright lawyers; tax lawyers; trade negotiators; arts and cultural service/ trade organizations and lobbyists; arts and cultural unions; entertainment corporation executives; think tanks; marketers; censors; film exhibitors; ombudsmen; economic statistics research centers; and so on participate in the decision-making process (p. 1).

Yudice (Forthcoming) believes that recognizing the diversity of Latin American countries is essential to policy implementation and choosing stakeholders who represent this diversity is crucial to the decision-making process. He states:

Globalization has had a profound impact on national frameworks.....a host of other actors are now considered crucial for the formulation and implementation of cultural policy.....new actors include NGOs, trade ministries and bodies, World Trade Organization, international financial institutions.....entertainment conglomerates, intellectual property lawyers, communities that use tourism, often in partnership with NGOs and private enterprise, as a means to sustain heritage (p. 4).

Colombia is another example showing adjustment to stakeholder needs and process as it is “riven by armed conflict among guerrillas, paramilitary groups, narcotraffickers, and the military, which also has a US-financed war on drugs. Mediating diversity is thus a life and death issue here, and to this end the government shifted its understanding of cultural policy from a traditional system of provision to a “communicative process that permits the transformation of social relations through a new politics of identity and recognition” (Yudice, Forthcoming, p. 5).

According to Yudice, who sites De Girolamo, “Chile recently revamped its cultural policies along three axes: decentralization, giving due recognition to all cultural and territorial identities that have contributed to national heritage; the integration of the arts and traditional and new media cultures into the curriculum at all levels (p. 5).

Public Participation

Best practices for public participation differ based on cultural perspectives, politics and values. According to the Organization of American States (2001), public participation refers to:

all interaction between government and civil society, and includes the process by which government and civil society open dialogue, establish partnerships, share information and otherwise interact to design, implement and evaluate development policies, projects, and programs.

The process requires the involvement and commitment of all interested parties, including, among others, the poor and traditionally marginalized groups, especially disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities (p.1).

There are several debates on how participation processes should proceed. Weeks (2000), believes that informed judgment and citizen dialogue through deliberative democracy are important for implementation. Weeks (2000), in reference to participation notes:

...conventional avenues of citizen involvement, such as public hearings, advisory boards, citizen commissions, and task forces, engage only a small number of citizens and typically involve only those with a particular interest in the specific policy arena. Participation by a few citizens with a special interest in the subject matter offers policy makers a skewed representation of the views of the general public and, worse, conveys to citizens the impression of special interest domination of the policy agenda. If participation is large, but unrepresentative, it may fail to accurately reflect the policy preferences of the community. If participation is small, but representative, the results may accurately reflect the

policy preferences of the community, but the larger goals of civic engagement will be sacrificed (p.361).

Weeks (2000) believes that informed judgment may help citizens move through political deadlock. He acknowledges that this is a new area of study and that more research needs to be done regarding recruiting strategies, time and flexibility issues.

Another approach found in collaborative planning involves the decentralization of government to civil society. Lane (2003) found, “civil society as the intermediate sphere between the state and the market....and that civil society is the social relations and structure that lies between the state and the market...therefore acts as challenge to state autonomy and market power (p. 362). Lane quotes James C. Scott, in *Seeing Like a State*, who showed, “that the direct engagement of citizens and non-state associations enabled the incorporation of indigenous knowledge that in turn was a central determinant of successful project planning” (p. 362). These ideas help justify the decentralization of government or “democratic decentralization” because “it involves the transfer of resources and power to lower levels of authority or non-state associations that are largely or wholly independent of central government” (p.362).

Lane (2003) also quotes Putnam’s (1993) study of civic engagement and institutional performance in Italy as a milestone in this discourse. He states:

Putnam conceptualized those features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks of reciprocal exchange and civic engagement, as “social capital.” Levels of social capital where, he demonstrated, a predictor of voluntary cooperation and collaboration within a given polity....the strength of civil society was in turn correlated with the performance of regional government (p.362).

Trust building is an important element in collaborative planning and consensus building within a diverse group of stakeholders. Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer (1998) define trust as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of another” (p.393-404).

Malhotra (2004), borrows three broad categories of trust:

- Deterrence-based trust considers the incentives that the other party faces. If incentives are aligned or if the other party does not gain from exploiting the vulnerability of the trustor, then trust increases.
- Knowledge-based trust considers the intrinsic characteristics of the other party. If the other party/s is seen as being fair and having integrity, these attributions increase trust.
- Identification-based trust rests on a consideration of the relationship between the parties: to the extent that each party is seen as inherently caring about each other’s welfare, then this perceived benevolence increases trust (p. 61).

Trust between diverse stakeholders creates reciprocity. Malhotra found that, “trust and reciprocity are correlated and that the degree of reciprocity is a function of the level of trust: large trusting acts make reciprocity more likely and more substantive....it is unclear why this is the case....may be because they entail greater risk for the trustor and trusted parties appreciated this” (p.62).

Minority Views in Group Process

In collaborative planning, minority views may lead to change through a process ripple effect. According to DeVries and DeDreu (2001), “Anecdotes from political and jury decision making, as well as from revolutionary movements, suggest that sometimes

small factions within a group or society can influence the larger majority. Sometimes minorities convince the majority (direct influence), and sometimes they inspire the majority to come to new and previously unconsidered points of view (indirect influence)” (p. 1). This inspires the question, “Can minority opposition influence innovation and change the way groups think?” DeVries and DeDreu found more clarity on minority views through researching a simple problem-solving task. They noted, “When a group member discovers there is a discrepancy between their own opinion and that of a majority in the group, attention will be focused on those two points of view. The group member considers only these two alternatives, in order to decide whether to stick to their own position or to conform to the majority...This process is called convergent thinking.....Given a consistent and persistent behavioral style, the minority will trigger the consideration of alternatives (to the majority), not necessarily the one suggested by the minority itself.....this creative thought process is called divergent thinking” (p.5). In a study of conversion theory in the realm of attitude change, Maass and Clark (1983), found a difference in public and private decision-making. They provided participants with written transcripts of group discussions on gay rights. In these discussions:

A minority of one group member gave eight arguments favoring gay rights, while the majority of four also gave a total of eight arguments, which opposed gay rights. Thus, participants read eight minority-supported arguments for one position, and eight majority-supported arguments for the opposing position. Subsequently participants were asked to give their opinions about gay rights. In one condition, these opinions would be publicly disposed in anticipation of group discussion, whereas in another condition these opinions would remain private

and anonymous. Results repeatedly revealed that in the public disclosure conditions, attitudes agreed more with the majority rather than the minority viewpoint, whereas private conditions, the reverse pattern was found (p. 197-215).

These are important issues to observe and be aware of in group process and decision-making. They ask the question, what happens when all group members do not get their needs met? Does resentment build within the group? If so, is this resentment/ conflict addressed and how does it influence the implementation of decisions?

Group Conflict Resolution

With complex choices being made between diverse stakeholders, it is difficult to ensure adequate representation of all stakeholders and the problems of protecting the “public interest.” Mediated negotiation and third-party facilitation is one response that is frequently used in collaborative planning. “Mediated negotiation” rather than “mediation” is used to focus on, “the presence of a neutral intervenor and to distinguish mediated negotiation from other consensual approaches to dispute resolution that employ the assistance of a third party” (Susskind & Ozawa, 1983, p.255). Susskind and Ozawa (1983) state:

Mediated negotiation is attractive because it addresses many of the procedural weaknesses of conventional dispute resolution mechanisms; that is, it allows for more direct involvement of those most affected by decisions than do most administrative and legislative processes; it produces results more rapidly and at lower cost than do courts; and it is flexible and therefore more adaptable to the specific needs of the parties in a given situation. Public sector disputes are

special. They differ from conventional two-party private disputes in that they involve choices with substantial spillover effects or externalities that often fall most directly on diffuse, inarticulate, and hard-to-represent groups (such as future generations) (p.256-57).

Susskind and Ozawa (1983), reviewed three cases involving mediated negotiation. One case, the Connecticut Negotiated Investment Strategy (NIS) was aimed at distributing \$33 million of federal aid in the form of a Social Services block Grant received by the state of Connecticut for the fiscal year 1984. Initiated by the Governor's office, 18 state agencies, 114 municipalities, and numerous private service agencies participated in the mediated negotiation (p. 261). The process went like this:

Three teams, representing the 18 state agencies, the municipalities, and the nonprofit public service providers, convened formally in five joint sessions held from October to December 1982. Prior to the negotiating sessions, representatives from the teams met to select a mediator. Training sessions were held to educate the participants about the NIS process and negotiating techniques. Ground rules for the negotiations were established by the participants. The negotiating sessions involved debating and revising a written statement prepared ahead of time by the participants. The mediator presented a draft agreement he had prepared by incorporating items of agreement generated during previous discussions. The final agreement outlined a process for distributing the SSBG funds and established a Tripartite Commission to monitor the implementation of the agreement, resolve outstanding issues and serve as interpreter of the agreement in future disputes. The document produced through

the NIS process and ultimately approved by the governor and the state legislature has been described as “a summary statement of all the teams positions rather than a collaborative effort to maximize joint gains”...a few key interest groups were not involved directly in the negotiations, most notably the human service consumers. The mediator did not raise the issue of representation with the teams once they had been selected.

Based on their case studies, Susskind and Ozawa (1983) came up with six criteria for judging the success of mediation efforts in the public sector:

1. The negotiated agreement should be readily acceptable to the parties involved.
2. The results must appear fair to the community.
3. The results should maximize joint gains (as judged by a disinterested observer).
4. The results should take past precedents into consideration.
5. An agreement should be reached with a minimal expenditure of time and money.
6. The process should improve rather than aggravate the relationships between or among the disputing parties (p.263-64).

Malhotra (2004) also noted that, “negotiation is another domain in which some people are able to overcome their perspective-taking limitations. Expert negotiators seem able to craft agreements that provide high benefits to the other parties with the realistic expectations that will lead to reciprocity and high benefits in return” (p. 71).

Conclusion

I believe that collaborative planning allows for increased communication among autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain. Issues including diverse stakeholders and public participation, minority views, conflict resolution and third party facilitation are worthy of investigation to better understand current issues organizations are facing in the collaborative process and best practices leading to sustainable effective decision-making and implementation. Again, based on limited research, a deeper (versus broader) investigation into each of the above mentioned issues and processes related to collaborative planning/ consensus building in the environmental and cultural arenas and comparisons of processes and politics in various countries is necessary to truly understand the best practices of decision-making in these fields.

Suggestions for Further Research

Probst, Carnevale and Triandis (1999), ask the question, "Do cultural values influence the manner in which people cooperate with one another?" Guided by established theories of culture, specifically the theory of individualism and collectivism, they draw from work on cooperation and culture that examines two additional dimensions of culture- vertical and horizontal and work that examines behavior in social dilemmas (p.172). Horizontal collectivism is, "the cultural pattern in which the individual sees the self as an aspect of the group. The self-concept is seen as closely tied to and interdependent with others of the in-group, who are seen as similar to the self. In addition, equality among group members is a value. It is characterized by a self-concept that is autonomous yet equal. (p. 175-76). Vertical collectivism is, "a cultural pattern in which individuals view the self as an aspect of the group. The self-concept is

closely tied to and interdependent with others of the in-group, but the members of the in-group differ from one another, particular with regard to social status. Inequality is accepted, and people do not see each other as the same. The self-concept is autonomous and inequality is expected. (p. 175-76). I believe research regarding horizontal and vertical collectivism could benefit from:

- a broad, diverse cross cultural study incorporating issues of race, class, and gender within experimental dilemmas.

More suggestions include:

- Power issues between diverse stakeholders and public participants and the effect of deliberative versus collaborative exchange on sustainable decision-making.
- The implications of globalization on stakeholder determination.
- Direct research on the usefulness of third-party negotiations in policy formulation especially regarding international relations.
- The process of convergent and divergent thinking in relation to minority views within decision-making processes.
- In-depth study of the dynamics of trust and reciprocity decisions related to deterrence, knowledge and identification based trust issues.

- The repercussions of time pressure on information processing specifically, primacy effects, ethnic stereotyping, and numerical anchoring.
- What does community and consensus-building and decision-making mean in an American culture that is hyper-individualized compared to other community-oriented cultures such as in France, Italy, Argentina, and Chile?
- How does architecture influence community and consensus building and decision-making in North America, Europe, South America?

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